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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000043

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SUBJECT: FORMER MP AND JOURNALIST ON VOA PROGRAMMING

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CLASSIFIED BY: Ramin Asgard, Director, Iran Regional Presence
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Voice of America (VOA) is well-positioned as an alternative to state-run Iranian TV to provide uncensored, impartial information that can help advance reform in Iran, a former reformist member of Iran's Sixth Majles and journalist told IRPOff 22 July. The former MP is in contact with VOA officials regarding programming concepts and was very interested in suggesting improvements that he believed would help VOA increase its audience inside Iran. He claimed that elite audiences in Iran prefer VOA to other foreign news broadcasts, specifically BBC. The former MP alleged that since the Iranian government is concerned about the impact of VOA, it does not object to other foreign TV programs because they help dilute VOA's potential audience share. Separate from VOA programming, he suggested that IRPO publish a weekly aimed at Iranians to address events that the Iranian government otherwise does not report about. End summary.

Recommendations For VOA Programming To Help Expand Audience

¶2. (C) IRPOff met with former reformist member of Iran's Sixth Majles Ali Nazeri (please protect), who is also a former journalist, on 22 July. The former MP claimed that Voice of America (VOA) is well-positioned to provide uncensored news regarding events inside Iran, in contrast to state-run TV that strictly controls the message, but he believed VOA could do more to attract additional viewers. He suggested that VOA devote 80 to 90 percent of its content to news and information that is impartial, which would be viewed by Iranians as more credible. He added that guests on VOA who are experts in their field, well-known, and knowledgeable, would be respected by viewers.

¶3. (C) He said that VOA should become more "Iranian," by including additional Iranian cultural program content, such as music and Iranian movies, including material banned from broadcast/distribution in Iran. The former MP suggested that a large portion of the population would like to watch more dance and music programs, and that adding 10 to 15 minutes of music to VOA's evening schedule would attract a wider family audience. He suggested that VOA broadcast concerts by Iranian musicians, including those whose music currently is banned in Iran, and particularly pop music. He explained that VOA is only received in major cities, as in smaller provincial areas it is easier for the IRIG to enforce the satellite ban. This same issue of

access to broadcast signals outside major cities also affected radio broadcasts, and he argued that VOA and Radio Farda would be more accessible to Iranians if the programs were broadcast using medium-wave.

VOA Helps Undermine Hardliners

¶4. (C) The former MP argued that reform would advance in Iran if people were more aware of events, and he suggested that VOA could provide this knowledge because it serves as an uncensored source of information. Alleging that there is a silent majority (the exact term he used was "turned-off majority") of approximately 15 to 16 million Iranians who do not participate in elections and are otherwise withdrawn from the political process entirely, the former MP said that VOA is a good outlet with which to reach this majority. He added that supporters of VOA are increasing daily and that the impact of the programming is "more than if there were 100 wars," as it helps undermine Iran's hardline leaders. Responding to IRPOff's question about whether Iranians are interested in a foreign media outlet's perspective about events taking place inside their country, the former MP said they are interested in outside messages as long as they are balanced and well-done. Furthermore, given heavy IRIG censorship, there was no access to uncensored information about Iran internal affairs.

VOA Most Preferred Foreign Broadcast Among Elite Audiences

¶5. (C) The former MP estimated that VOA TV is watched by 7 to 10 million viewers, primarily in large Iranian cities, and is less watched in small towns because of limited satellite TV access. Popular programs include News and Views (Khabarha va Nazarha);

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NewsTalk (Tafsir-e Khabar), which he described as the most popular news analysis program; and Nightsong (Shabahang), which he said appeals to Iranian family audiences. He explained that Iranian youth like Shabahang because of its cultural content and it appeals to their interest in fashion and movies. He has three cousins from a conservative family who do not have a satellite dish and are not allowed to watch satellite TV, but whenever they visit the former MP they watch Shabahang.

¶6. (C) He noted that Iranian intellectuals, students, and educated elites watch VOA rather than the expatriate channels broadcasted from Los Angeles. According to the former MP, the LA programs are cheaply produced, ill-informed, and often have simplistic political messages consisting of "cursing" the Iranian government. He said these programs sometimes insult Islam, which alienates people in Iran who may be opposed to the Iranian government but not to the Islamic religion. However, he indicated that members of Iran's middle and lower classes like watching the LA channels for entertainment. When IRPOff asked about the popularity of BBC the former MP said that Iranians prefer American broadcasts, as the British are not well-liked and BBC's reputation has suffered since the revolution. If VOA could improve its programming, it could more effectively compete with foreign broadcasts such as BBC, he said.

Iranian Government Reaction To Foreign TV Programs

¶7. (C) The former MP said that the Iranian government supports the presence of other satellite TV networks, such as MBC and the not-yet-launched BBC Persia, as a counter to VOA. The government wants these programs to be effective so that they dilute the impact of VOA, he claimed. The former MP argued that Iranian state-TV cannot compete with VOA because VOA can report freely about issues while state-TV offers censored information from the perspective of the Iranian leadership. He believed that Iran's state-run external media outlets, such as Press TV,

were copying VOA and had learned from and incorporated elements of its programming.

Suggestion For IRPO Weekly Aimed At Iranian Audiences

¶18. (C) While noting that Iran's state-run media does not provide the public with information about certain topics, the former MP asked if IRPO could publish a weekly from Dubai aimed at Iranian audiences that would address internal events in Iran in an uncensored and balanced manner. For example, he said that according to his media contacts and reading of the Iranian press, the state-run outlets had not publicized internally key elements of the nuclear issue. For example, he noted that the mass of Iranians had no understanding at all of what the P5+1 offer contained, nor did they know of the current two week period Iran has to provide a substantive response to the offer. He suggested that an IRPO weekly would be a good outlet to provide this type of information, as well as other topics that are not being reported in Iran.

Biographic Information

¶19. (C) The former reformist MP was involved in cultural and media efforts during his service in the Sixth Majles and he also has a background in journalism. He started the weekly newspaper Arzesh aimed at Iranian students, which was banned in 1999, and he worked for Kayhan newspaper during former President Khatami's administration. He currently is doing freelance work.

¶10. (C) Comment: The former MP spoke very highly of VOA and the role he believed it could play in Iran, to the extent that IRPOff had to press for information about other TV programs that may be popular among Iranian viewers. He seemed most interested in promoting the benefits of VOA to IRPOff and explaining how he believed VOA could be made even more effective. His suggestions that VOA provide more impartial and balanced programming, and include well-respected experts, echoed comments made to IRPOff previously by other Iranian contacts.

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